

Effects of audience participation in CSO communication

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Background

In the context of interactive and participating audiences and civil society organisations in this essay, the focus is on a relatively new, but more determining the journalism organisation, *Átlátszó*. It operates an investigative journalism portal, *atlatszo.hu*, but it also offers a safety leaking platform, *MagyarLeaks* (it is practically the Hungarian *WikiLeaks*). The aim of the interview essay was to review the role of audience participation in the life of a CSO aiming on transparency in Hungary. The question arises on how a CSO may use and profit from the participatory presence of different audiences and reach its goals alongside the mainstream mass media channels. Interviewee *AgnesUrban*, alongside her scientific and academic expertise in the field of media economics, is a co-founder and expert at *Átlátszó*. She gives a wide overview of international and Hungarian media practices and is an active player in the civil society organisational life in Hungary.

Introduction of *Átlátszó* Center for Investigative Journalism:

Átlátszó Center for Investigative Journalism is a watchdog NGO based in Budapest, Hungary, that combines investigative journalism and civic activism to promote transparency in Hungary. *Atlatszo.hu* publishes all its relevant findings on the internet and organises transparency campaigns with the involvement of the public.

Átlátszó Center states that the mainstream media in Hungary heavily depend on economic and political interest groups, that often it is not a journalist, but the owner who decides what can be published. The actual media landscape is under the power of and politically controlled by the Media Authority due to the new Hungarian media law, whose public service media is controlled by appointees from political parties. In this situation of very limited freedom of press in Hungary, there are many facts (taboos, corruption etc.) to be uncovered by the independent media. Átlátszó Center for Investigative Journalism was created to produce exclusive investigative reports, but they also help and defend whistleblowers, who wish to shine light on corruption issues or other misuses of power but cannot turn to the mainstream press. Atlatszo.hu staff is a growing group of anti-corruption and pro-transparency journalists, with IT specialists, lawyers, experts and other supporters. Atlatszo.hu is primarily interested in materials concerning Hungary, while they do not refuse to publish significant materials outside of their primary scope. (Source: <http://atlatszo.hu>)

What does audience interactivity and participation mean for you from a professional point of view?

Participation of the audience and interactivity is a continuously evolving phenomenon. It had some antecedents in traditional media, but its real field is obviously the online services. In the 1990s the online forums brought a new experience to the media and a few years later UGC (user generated content) was the buzzword. Today social filtering is the focus for researchers. Social networks are a new distribution channel for media content and it is still a question on how it influences the value chain.

In your opinion at what level are the different organisations using the interactive and participatory communication strategy possibilities?

The usage of interactive media is already a necessity in daily business. It is not media specific and the companies (at least in consumer markets) cannot avoid direct communication with the consumers. Its usage became widespread among political parties, civil organisations, etc.

If they are using it, how do they use it? Please explain a good case!

A new Hungarian investigative journalism portal, Atlatszo.hu was launched in July. It produces investigative reports, accepts information from whistleblowers, files requests of data on the basis on freedom of information laws and begins freedom of information lawsuits in case of refusal.

Atlatszo.hu publishes all its relevant findings on the internet and organises transparency campaigns with the involvement of the public. It also builds on so-called crowd sourcing, where some stories are partly passed onto its audience. For example, the portal

published a list of sold properties in the central district of Budapest and the prices were incredibly low. The buyers, in some cases, were related to the Municipality (e.g. employees of the City Hall). Users were asked to help identify the names from the list and it worked, where some names from the list were identified by the visitors of the portal.

Are they using it in a goal oriented way for their communication strategy? Or is it a case where the participatory audience is the basis of existence for the organisation?

The case mentioned above in the Atlatzo.hu portal, is a good example where it would not work without continuous participation from the audience. Of course a single portal is not enough; usage of social networking sites (Facebook) is an integral part of the strategy. Atlatzo.hu now launches its presence on Twitter and Tumblr.

What are the difficulties, limitations and risks of the interactivity and participation based communication strategy? Please explain an example!

It is interesting that one of the first difficulties that atlatzo.hu has faced, stems from the technology itself. A new case was launched on Friday morning, where it attracted a lot of interest and visits on the webpage. Consequently, the server could not serve the requests and information.

Of course the real question was on how this project can be financed in long run. We build our business model on donations of private individuals and foundations. The technological costs are manageable, but the cost of content creation is very high. It is not clear yet if this will be just a hobby for some civilians in the long run or if it will be a significant player in the Hungarian media market as a professional portal.

Regarding the Hungarian practice, where (market players, other organisations, individuals, education, advisory companies etc.) can we identify the highest know-how to prepare and launch a communication strategy based on audience interactivity and participation?

It seems now that non-profit organisations are real pioneers in this field. They are highly innovative, perhaps because the average age in these organisations are relatively low. I have had negative experiences in the case of governmental institutions, municipalities and other state offices. Media companies and business corporations are highly different. There are companies with professional communication strategies and there are others who display a poor performance.

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